

**EVERYONE
BRAVE IS
FORGIVEN**

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For my grandparents – Mary & David, NJ & M

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PART I
PRESERVATION

War was declared at 11.15 and Mary North signed up at noon. She did it at lunch, before telegrams came, in case her mother said no. She left finishing school unfinished. Skiing down from Mont-Choisi, she ditched her equipment at the foot of the slope and telegraphed the War Office from Lausanne. Nineteen hours later she reached St Pancras, in clouds of steam, still wearing her alpine sweater. The train's whistle screamed. London, then. It was a city in love with beginnings.

She went straight to the War Office. The ink still smelled of salt on the map they issued her. She rushed across town to her assignment, desperate not to miss a minute of the war but anxious she already had. As she ran through Trafalgar Square waving for a taxi, the pigeons flew up before her and their clacking wings were a thousand knives tapped against claret glasses, praying silence. Any moment now it would start – this dreaded and wonderful thing – and could never be won without her.

What was war, after all, but morale in helmets and Jeeps? And what was morale if not one hundred million little conversations, the sum of which might leave men brave enough to advance? The true heart of war was small talk, in which Mary was wonderfully expert. The morning matched her mood, without cloud or equivalence in memory. In London under lucent skies ten thousand young women were hurrying to their new positions, on orders from Whitehall, from chambers unknowable in the old

marble heart of the beast. Mary joined gladly the great flow of the willing.

The War Office had given no further details, and this was a good sign. They would make her a liaison, or an attaché to a general's staff. All the speaking parts went to girls of good family. It was even rumoured that they needed spies, which appealed most of all since one might be oneself twice over.

Mary flagged down a cab and showed her map to the driver. He held it at arm's length, squinting at the scrawled red cross that marked where she was to report. She found him unbearably slow.

'This big building, in Hawley Street?'

'Yes,' said Mary. 'As quick as you like.'

'It's Hawley Street School, isn't it?'

'I shouldn't think so. I'm to report for war work, you see.'

'Oh. Only I don't know what else it could be around there but the school. The rest of that street is just houses.'

Mary opened her mouth to argue, then stopped and tugged at her gloves. Because of course they didn't have a glittering tower, just off Horse Guards, labelled 'Ministry of Wild Intrigue'. Naturally they would have her report somewhere innocuous.

'Right then,' she said. 'I expect I am to be made a schoolmistress.'

The man nodded. 'Makes sense, doesn't it? Half the schoolmasters in London must be joining up for the war.'

'Then let's hope the cane proves effective against the enemy's tanks.'

The man drove them to Hawley Street with no more haste than the delivery of one more schoolmistress would merit. Mary was careful to adopt the expression an ordinary young woman might wear – a girl for whom the taxi ride would be an unaccustomed extravagance, and for whom the prospect of work as a schoolteacher would seem a thrill. She made her face suggest the

kind of sincere immersion in the present moment that she imagined dairy animals must also enjoy, or geese.

Arriving at the school, she felt observed. In character, she tipped the taxi driver a quarter of what she would normally have given him. This was her first test, after all. She put on the apologetic walk of an ordinary girl presenting for interview. As if the air resented being parted. As if the ground shrieked from the wound of each step.

She found the headmistress's office and introduced herself. Miss Vine nodded but wouldn't look up from her desk. Avian and cardiganed, spectacles on a bath-plug chain.

'North,' said Mary again, investing the name with its significance.

'Yes, I heard you quite well. You are to take Kestrel Class. Begin with the register. Learn their names as smartly as you can.'

'Very good,' said Mary.

'Have you taught before?'

'No,' said Mary, 'but I can't imagine there's much to it.'

The headmistress fixed her with two wintry pools. 'Your imagination is not on the syllabus.'

'Forgive me. No, I have never taught before.'

'Very well. Be firm, give no liberties, and do not underestimate the importance of the child forming his letters properly. As the hand, the mind.'

Mary felt that the 'headmistress' was overdoing it, rather. She might mention it to the woman's superior, once she discovered what outfit she was really joining. Although in mitigation, the woman's attention to detail was impressive. Here were pots of sharpened pencils; tins of drawing pins. Here was a tidy stack of hymn books, each one covered in a different wallpaper, just as children would really have done the job if one had tasked them with it in the first week of the new school year.

The headmistress glanced up. 'I can't imagine what you are smirking at.'

'Sorry,' said Mary, unable to keep the glint of communication from her eyes, and slightly flustered when it wasn't returned.

'Kestrels,' said the headmistress. 'Along the corridor, third on the left.'

When Mary entered the classroom thirty-one children fell silent at their hinge-top desks. They watched her, owl-eyed, heads pivoting. They might be eight or ten years old, she supposed – although of course children suffered dreadfully from invisibility and required a conscious adjustment of the eye in order to be focused on at all.

'Good morning, class. My name is Mary North.'

'*Good morning Miss North.*'

The children chanted it in the ageless tone exactly between deference and mockery, so perfectly that Mary's stomach lurched. It was all just too realistic.

She taught them mathematics before lunch and composition after, hoping that a curtain would finally be whisked away; that her audition would give way to her recruitment. When the bell rang for the end of the day she ran to the nearest post office and dashed off an indignant telegram to the War Office, wondering if there'd been some mistake.

There was no mistake, of course. For every reproach that would be laid at London's door in the great disjunction to come – for all the convoys missing their escorts in fog, for all the breeches shipped with mismatched barrels, for all the lovers supplied with hearts of the wrong calibre – it was never once alleged that the grand old capital did not excel at letting one know, precisely, where one's fight was to begin.